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Russel Lawrence Barsh

*University of Washington*

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# PLAINS INDIAN AGRARIANISM AND CLASS CONFLICT

RUSSEL LAWRENCE BARSH

Relatively little has been done to trace the political structures of American Indians through the years 1890 to 1940, when reservation economies were undergoing their most dramatic changes. That failure has left the false impression of a fifty-year institutional vacuum. In fact, the middle years were times of complex redistributions of power and the emergence of indigenous socioeconomic classes. It was also perhaps the earliest period in which Plains Indians enjoyed anything like an American-style, decentralized elective democracy.

Federal programs shifted the control of the Indians' food supply. From being skilled hunter-organizers they became recipients of government patronage, became small landholders and, finally, tribal technocrats. In other words, they experienced two cycles of centralization. An agrarian entrepreneurial middle class and a

landless bureaucratic class emerged, and their competition for political influence has dominated reservation life ever since. As in many developing countries, modernization was accompanied by a conflict between small-scale agrarian capitalism and central planning.

If valid, this thesis requires reversing some well-entrenched historical judgments, *i.e.*, that the General Allotment Act was bad because it reduced the Indians' aggregate landholdings, and that the Indian New Deal was good because it stopped allotment and encouraged Indian self-government. On the contrary, allotment may have given Indian leaders the opportunity to reestablish their economic and political independence from the Bureau of Indian Affairs—and the New Deal reorganization program crushed this emergent Indian bourgeoisie and its growing power.

## TRADITIONAL MERITOCRACY

Traditional Plains Indian leadership was earned and evolved through ceremonies of recognition by family and community.<sup>1</sup> With no fixed number of leaders and virtually universal competition for recognition, good people were able to rise to influence within

*Russel Barsh has taught law and public policy at the University of Washington. Since 1984 he has worked directly in advocacy and development for native peoples.*

each family and eventually to win acknowledgement as family representatives in the nation's councils.<sup>2</sup> This situation helped to maintain a certain balance of representation and power among families and obviated any lasting concentrations of control.<sup>3</sup> Thus, traditional government could best be described as an open-ended meritocracy with many gently competing poles of authority.

Individual freedom was ensured by the representation of all families in council and by the requirement of consensus for national action. Equally important was the nature of the economy, which rewarded coordination but did not make it necessary for survival. Even the smallest family, functioning as a cooperative economic unit, could provide for itself under most circumstances. Only in times of war or disaster were wider economic and security arrangements unavoidable. Government therefore functioned "at need" rather than as a permanent, coercive establishment.

Although traditional leaders were not necessarily more productive as hunters, they were notable as facilitators of collective action (Service 1974, 50-51; Clastres 1974, 34; Bernard 1928).<sup>4</sup> This enabled them to accumulate a surplus of goods and obligations that could be mobilized, through sharing and gifting, to win support for their plans. In an economy based on unpredictable resources such as wildlife, moreover, even skillful producers faced periodic shortages. Family networks provided a system of social security against these unavoidable shortages, and individuals successful at collecting and reallocating resources inevitably acquired a degree of influence and trust. Effective leadership depended on knowing how to distribute what had been produced.

The traditional political system was nonetheless characterized by considerable social mobility (Goldschmidt 1959, 214). No one could control the economic factors crucial for survival. Wildlife was freely available, and productivity depended chiefly on individual skill and effort. Thus, while long-term social security benefited from the existence of family

sharing networks, each individual's economic contribution to the family system was similar.

### THE PATRONAGE SYSTEM

By the 1870s, traditional plains economies had been shattered by war, relocation, loss of hunting territories, destruction of game by railroad contractors, and restrictions on the movements of "Agency Indians." For at least a generation, most Indians were entirely dependent on government aid for sustenance. Under these circumstances, reservation administrators not surprisingly wielded power by controlling the distribution of rations, tools, and employment. "If you are an agitator, then you don't get so much; but if you are [an] undertaker you get more rations every time" (U.S. Senate 1929, 12378).

Reservation agents themselves were political appointees rather than civil servants until 1907, and they well understood the power of patronage. Operating under a general policy of breaking traditional political institutions, agents identified the most cooperative men in the community and subsidized their campaigns for leadership (U.S. Senate 1929, 12442, 12760). "The agent, having control of the food supply and its distribution, as well as control over the Indians' personal freedom, held power with which the chiefs could not compete" (MacGregor 1946, 35).

Economic and political influence thus passed from individuals skilled at organizing Indians to those whom whites trusted to serve as conduits. Rewarding cooperative Indians with salaries as chiefs, policemen, judges, and clerks gave them the financial resources to build up their own following through philanthropy, competing with and ultimately displacing the influence of the former leaders whose sources of wealth had disappeared. But while the superintendent's chiefs enjoyed economic privileges, they lacked any real power over reservation affairs. "They do no harm—or anything else," one contemporary Sioux writer observed ("Iktomi" 1937, 105).

## AGRARIAN DEMOCRACY

The allotment of agricultural lands among individual Indian households began in the 1850s and was extended to all reservations in 1887. Relative security of legal title created an opportunity for enterprising individuals to regain a limited degree of independence from the ration list (U.S. Senate 1929, 12503, 12512). Farming and ranching also gave ambitious men an opportunity to accumulate wealth outside the Bureau of Indian Affairs' patronage system and, through sharing and gifting, to establish themselves as autonomous leaders. Many who are viewed today as "traditional" leaders had their start on the farm (Mails 1979, 68).

Nonetheless, agrarian leaders took advantage of the patronage system until they gained sufficient independence to compete with the Indian bureau for power. Allotments could not be mortgaged, so a successful start depended on government aid to buy cattle or farm machinery (Trosper 1978; Carlson 1981). Many also worked for the Indian Service long enough to finance a family spread, as did a recent Carlisle graduate who had become a "successful ranchman" (Friedman 1909, 53):

He has a modern two-story house on a very large ranch of which he is the owner, and is the possessor of 100 cattle and 30 horses. [He] was, for several years, a clerk in the Indian Service, but abandoned this work because, as he states, "I have learned that one can do better and earn more money using his own resources and working at a business of his own." He takes a leading role in the councils of his people.

The first generation of rancher-leaders was therefore scarcely distinguishable from the old patronage chiefs, except that they used their relationship with whites to secure capital rather than to win permanent employment. In the process, moreover, they assimilated much of their patrons' American-style Calvinism, including contempt for less motivated Indians.

"The time is at hand when every person should pay his way," the Lodge Pole Indian Stockmen's Association told satisfied Congressmen. "The days of getting something for nothing are gone" (U.S. Senate 1934, 296).

It is also significant that one-third of the young Indians who attended Carlisle Indian School became farmers and ranchers (Friedman 1912, 282), forming the nucleus of an educated agrarian bourgeoisie. Agriculture was not viewed as a hardship, but as a marriage of traditional values and economic autonomy. "Cling to your landed estate," Crow rancher Robert Yellowtail admonished Carlisle's graduating class seventy years ago. "Sell not a foot of it" (Yellowtail 1913, 411). "We gained self-respect," Frank Fools Crow recalls of this period, "and were able to maintain much of our traditional way of life" (Mails 1979, 109).<sup>5</sup>

Characteristic of this agrarian movement was the appearance of relatively autonomous Indian ranchers' associations (Grinnell 1915, 176-77; U.S. Senate 1934, 295-97). Many were cooperatives, pooling land and sharing the costs of fencing. For example, the Lodge Pole Indian Stockmen's Association on Montana's Fort Belknap Reservation fenced nearly thirty square miles for its fifty-two members in the 1920s. The Association also offered an independent, voluntary political base for challenging the Indian Service and its patronage leadership by organizing new tribal "business councils" and running candidates for tribal and state office.<sup>6</sup>

## INCIPIENT FEUDALISM

Agrarian prosperity depended not only on the allottee's skills as a producer and domestic manager but also on his abilities as an organizer. There were economies of scale to be realized in ranching and mechanized farming. Larger cattle spreads required fewer hands per animal and ran much lower risks of overstocking in drought years. Larger farms could afford more machines and keep them in use more of the time, reducing capital and labor costs per bushel. Enterprising Indians addressed this by

pooling neighboring allotments through sales, leases, and wills. On the Flathead Reservation in the 1920s, for example, at least 138 of the 370 individual purchasers of Indian allotments were other Indians (U.S. Senate 1929, 12426-31).

Not all allottees were so fortunate, however. Allotments were small by western American standards, offering little leeway for bad years or poor management (Leupp 1910, 79-80; U.S. Senate 1929, 12322). Few produced a significant surplus (Meriam 1928, 491) and bank credit was virtually nonexistent. Allotments could not be taxed or sold until the allottee had been declared "competent to manage his own affairs," but in 1917 the Bureau of Indian Affairs adopted a policy of forcing competency on allottees as quickly as possible. Operating difficulties, taxes, and pressure to sell out to better-capitalized whites rapidly took their toll. By the 1930s about one-third of the Indians' allotted acreage nationwide had been lost and there were an estimated 150,000 landless Indians (U.S. Senate 1934, 59).

This piecemeal dispossession led to the emergence of a kind of rural Indian working class dependent on public relief and migrant farm labor for its survival (U.S. Senate 1929, 12567, 12578, 12637). The Indian Bureau took advantage of this state of things to contract Indians by the truckload as a cheap alternative to Mexican labor in sugar beet and cotton fields (U.S. Senate 1929, 12753; Reynolds 1911; Leupp 1910, 90, 155-58). Many of these opportunities disappeared in the 1920s, however, with the widespread use of combines and other mechanical harvesters (U.S. Senate 1929, 12320). Malnutrition and starvation threatened growing numbers of Indians, despite the renewal of ration distributions.

At the same time, this situation contributed to the influence of those who had succeeded in consolidating their landholdings. On the Crow Reservation, for example, eighteen families controlled four thousand cattle and eight thousand horses by 1915, when the average allottee was fortunate to own fifty

head. Some individual Blackfeet and Flathead ranchers, including leaders of the stockmen's associations, owned several thousand head apiece, and a few Fort Belknap farmers were tilling five times the average acreage of their neighbors (Grinnell 1915, 177; U.S. Senate 1929, 12637; U.S. Senate 1934, 297). Land-based dynasties emerged, and for the first time some Indians found themselves working on land owned by other Indians (U.S. Senate 1929, 12567, 12578).

Living in some of the least developed agrarian regions of the country, landless Indians had little possibility of earning enough money to reestablish themselves. The unrestricted upward mobility of the old hunting economy had completely disappeared. Although influence was divided among competing landowners and their family retainers, it was growing increasingly static and, with continued consolidation and loss of lands, more centralized. This tendency distinguished allotted agriculture from traditional foraging economies. A successful hunter could leave his children nothing but his good name, while a successful Indian rancher could leave them his estate and thus a head start in acquiring influence.

#### THE RANCHING COLLAPSE

Some indication of the economic revolution taking place in Indian country can be found in Bureau of Indian Affairs statistics for the decade ending in 1919 (U.S. House 1919, 748-79). Indian cattle production rose fourfold, and crop yields nearly sixfold, while wages barely doubled and actually fell from 39 to 19 percent of reservation earned income. Only about half of the Indians earning wages in 1919 found work outside the Indian Service, and per capita wages (\$136) were lower than per capita earnings from agriculture (\$180). Indians were working 52 percent of their allotted acreage and 69 percent of unallotted reservation lands. Only a quarter of total Indian income was unearned, *i.e.*, from leasing or relief.

The Indians' agrarian prosperity was short-lived, however. While the First World War was initially a blessing, more than doubling the price of beef, it also gave non-Indian ranchers an added incentive to expand onto the reservations. Often in collusion with Bureau of Indian Affairs employees, a dozen large cattle companies were able to buy or lease most of the good Indian grazing land in Montana by 1928 (U.S. Senate 1929, 12314, 12348, 12847). A common method was called "checkerboarding": the company would acquire alternating parcels over a large area, frequently by intimidation, and then force the remaining Indian owners to fence or sell out.

The Indian bureau helped by forcing fee patents on allottees, subjecting them to taxes they could not afford, and by charging them with the costs of reclamation projects from which they derived no benefit (U.S. Senate 1929, 12316, 12383, 12448, 12464, 12670, 12685, 12747; U.S. Senate 1930). It also discontinued credit for cattle purchases and encouraged ranchers to switch to farming, relocating Indian families from good grazing lands, which were then leased, to poor farming lands (U.S. Senate 1929, 12522, 12528, 12551, 12556, 12584, 12601, 12652, 12663, 12751). The postwar depression and drought finished off most of the Indian ranchers, and many of the non-Indians as well (U.S. Senate 1929, 12336).

The Northern Cheyennes received their first issue of government cattle in 1903. By 1908 they had made their first deliveries to the Chicago stockyards, and by 1912 were running over 12,000 head on the reservation (Leupp 1910, 162; U.S. Senate 1929, 12845). In 1915 the Indian Service forcibly consolidated all herds of individual Cheyennes into a federally managed "tribal herd," which by the end of the war was down to 4,200 head. Most Cheyenne ranchers never recovered. On the Blackfeet reservation, the number of cattle owned by Indians fell from 60,000 to 2,000 during the war years (U.S. Senate 1929, 12684). Once again, the effect was to aggravate income disparities.

## TECHNOCRACY

The evolution of a landed Indian middle class was not only a source of resentment among the growing ranks of landless Indians but also an increasing irritant to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Autonomous ranchers' associations and business councils were viewed as "rather a nuisance because [they served] as a forum for agitators" (Meriam 1928, 633). Even the well-intentioned New Deal reformer, John Collier, who was forever impressed with what he thought was the traditional Indian way of life based on collectivism, could never acknowledge the legitimacy of an Indian middle class based on the ownership of private property. When in 1933 he proposed retribalizing reservation lands and restricting the sale and inheritance of allotments, Indian ranchers accused him of being a "communist" (U.S. Senate 1934, 365, 393).

In the meantime, a growing number of Indians sought economic security in government employment. This new generation of Indian bureaucrats—a kind of clerical proletariat—was better educated and more Americanized than the patronage chiefs, and viewed both the vestigial patronage system and prosperous Indian stockmen as parts of an old antidemocratic order. John Collier's proposals offered them a fresh economic start, breaking the evolving Indian agrarian hegemony and returning political power, through the local ballot, to a greater number of the people.

It was increasingly the opinion of white reformers that the remaining large private Indian cattle holdings were inequitable and should be reduced (Meriam 1928, 506). Collier's original proposals emphasized land consolidation, rather than the Indians' right to form business corporations for economic self-improvement. To the extent that the promise of land reform won the support of the dispossessed, Collier exploited an evolving class division within Indian society itself. Indian cattlemen naturally viewed all this with alarm. The new system would "discourage Indian home and stock improvement" by weakening

private ownership, representatives of the Navajo, Yakima, and Shoshone tribes told Congress, and would "plac[e] in the hands of irresponsible Indians too much authority and power" (U.S. Senate 1934, 405, 408, 418).

As Collier's proposed land reforms met with stiffer opposition on constitutional grounds, the administration shifted its emphasis to the idea of reservation self-government.<sup>7</sup> This, however, made little sense to existing tribal business councils, who viewed it as an extension of the reservation patronage system. According to Mary Small, a Southern Cheyenne banker (U.S. Senate 1934, 366):

Self-government to this extent is already accomplished through the tribal councils and tribal business committees, which, by the way, were organized and functioning long before Mr. Collier manifested his great interest in the Indians in general. As you know, at these councils and business meetings, Indians discuss matters they consider of vital importance to the tribe and initiate measures for the better management of their affairs. But, no action of such councils or committees may become effective without the approval of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs or Secretary of the Interior. Where is the advantage of an almost similar system bearing John Collier's name?

The Indian Reorganization Act nonetheless gave the new Indian tribal councils exactly those land-reform powers, such as expropriation, that Congress had refused to give outright to the Indian Service. Since the councils now operated as satraps of the federal administrative system, moreover, they also offered greatly expanded revolving-door employment opportunities for Indian technocrats. This empowerment of Indian bureaucrats evolved into a new patronage system based on the reorganized councils' regulatory monopoly of economic resources, including local employment and relief payments as well as land and natural resources. Reorganized councils also used reconsolidated

tribal lands as a source of independent operating income, putting them in direct competition with allottees for acreage, capital, and markets.

Reorganization may also have had important external political consequences. Not only did land consolidation reduce the economic basis for independent Indian political action but the new internal elective political and patronage system captured the energies of the next generation of ambitious young Indians and distracted them from participating in the wider political system. At the same time, a revolving door between the new tribal bureaucracies and the Bureau of Indian Affairs itself created an enormous supply of relatively well-paid, secure jobs, distracting young Indians from independent enterprise as well as from outside private employment.<sup>8</sup> In net effect, reorganization helped recapture and recolonize the Indians' economic and political efforts.

#### CONSOLIDATION

"Self-determination," the "new" federal direction in Indian policy since 1970, has consolidated the sociopolitical consequences of reorganization by greatly increasing the role of the tribal councils as monopoly suppliers of employment and financial aid, and there has been no offsetting decentralization of land ownership. Sixty-five years ago, nearly two-thirds of reservation Indians' income was derived from self-employment and less than one-tenth from public employment, but by the 1970s these proportions had reversed (Barsh and Diaz-Knauf 1984). A new class structure has emerged, with a middle-class managerial elite and a majority of unemployed who lack any means of self-sufficiency. Recruitment by the managerial class remains with families that seek to preserve dependency—the "federal trust relationship"—because the election or employment of dissenters will simply result in administrative obstructions and reduced federal aid.

Change may nonetheless result from declining federal financial support for Indian self-

government. Indian unemployment has risen sharply since 1980, and current national budget-balancing proposals threaten to reduce direct federal aid to Indians by half. Deprived of federally financed jobs and relief payments, tribal councils will lose most of their hold over reservation Indians. Accelerating the development of extractive industries such as mining or logging, or frustrating landed Indians' efforts to rebuild some measure of agrarian self-sufficiency, will simply add to the erosion of their political influence. We may see a return to the conditions of the 1910s—increased agrarian and private business enterprise, the development of independent Indian community associations, and a significant reentry of reservation Indians into off-reservation politics.

#### SOME COMPARISONS

What lessons can be learned from this experience? Perhaps the most important one concerns the potential for economic and class antagonisms to energize political change—and not necessarily for the best, as when the new options are structures designed by outsiders. On the contemporary scene, there is growing antagonism between the tribal technocracy—no longer a proletariat but a relatively privileged and entrenched professional elite—and jobless Indians, who represent today's equivalent of the landless Indians of the 1930s. In both instances, the motivating force has been external: federal land allotment policies in the 1930s, government aid reductions today.

It would be useful to compare the socioeconomic histories of Indian reservations in the Great Plains to those in the Pacific Northwest, where most Indians remained fishermen and there was only limited allotment—chiefly of forest lands. There appears to have been a similar emergence and collapse of an independent entrepreneurial middle class, based on family ownership of fishing vessels and small sawmills. Federal consolidation of forest management units and the development of tribal logging and milling monopolies de-

stroyed a number of these family fortunes in the 1940s and 1950s, and more recently there have been efforts to tribalize (nationalize) Indian fishing. The effect, once again, has been to shift political power from enterprising Indian families to tribal technocrats.

In many developing countries, agrarian movements are engaged in similar struggles with urban technocrats, promoting nationalization and industrialization at the expense of the self-sufficiency of the countryside. There are some important differences, of course. In Asia, much of Latin America, and parts of Africa, the contemporary agrarian system still embodies elements of feudalism, and there is as much of a struggle between agrarian and industrial capitalism as there is between participatory economic organization and centralization. Yet while the agrarian movements in these countries tend to place great emphasis on class unity among peasants, their leadership is often recruited from the rural middle class of smaller landowners. When the propertied middle class evolves into the major threat to established power, established power tries to enlist the poor against it.

When we hear it said today that Indians do not believe in property or in private enterprise, we are still hearing the echoes of the struggle against Indian agrarian entrepreneurs in the 1930s—a struggle waged in the name of liberating landless Indians from poverty, but which in reality returned reservation economies to government dependence. If the next decade sees a renewed Indian agrarian movement, it will inevitably result, at least temporarily, in renewed tensions between successful families and other Indians, and in the renewal of old political antagonism that could once again defeat the possibility of economic independence and autonomous political participation.

#### NOTES

1. More detailed models of traditional plains political systems may be found in Barsh (1986) and Miller (1955), and a particularly good description of Crow political life may be found in Voget (1984, 49–54). These models should not be applied uncritically.



cally to more authoritarian Indian societies, such as farmers of the irrigated Southwest.

2. "Family" is used here rather loosely, owing to the great variety of tribal political structures. Among Lakota, the most appropriate unit of analysis would be the *tiyospaye*, which served as both a collective economic unit and as a unit of political representation and as such remained largely autonomous.

3. We should not underestimate, however, the stabilizing role of organizations of women that underlay the family structure, particularly where clan membership passed matrilineally.

4. The same general observations should apply to other foraging societies, to fishermen, and to horticulturalists lacking centralized industrial infrastructure (such as irrigation) or specialization of labor.

5. But compare Wissler's (1938, 234) portrait of a successful Indian rancher who, being neither Indian nor white, committed suicide out of frustration.

6. Agricultural fairs, originally promoted by the Indian Service as a means of stimulating individual competition (Leupp 1910, 159-62), evolved into today's powwows and became a major theater for Indian political activity.

7. There was widespread concern that radical land reform would violate the Fifth Amendment's prohibition against the taking of private property without just compensation and thus trigger a new round of Indian claims litigation against the government. See, generally, the discussion of the New Deal by Barsh and Henderson (1980).

8. By the 1970s, Indians were a majority of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' employees, but were disproportionately concentrated in lower grades (Barsh 1980).

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